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Article published Jan 22, 2006

Scofflaws cough up \$1.5M in fines at Southfield-based court

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Even scofflaws can have a change of heart.

Otherwise, officials are hard-pressed to explain the success of the 46th District Court that has collected more than \$1.5 million from traffic offenders who have ignored previous collection attempts -- despite license suspensions and the possibility of arrest.

No one factor accounts for that success, court Administrator Donna Beaudet said. But some creative software and a hard-working, courteous staff are a major component, she said.

Whatever the reason, the 46th District Court collection program has put the Southfield-based court in the spotlight, according to state officials. "We want other courts to take a look at what Southfield is doing," said Beth Barber, trial court collection project manager for state of Michigan.

The court, which also serves Lathrup Village, Beverly Hills, Bingham Farms and Franklin Village, has been sending computer-generated notices reminding scofflaws their driver licenses have probably been suspended, and it might be a good time to settle up for old moving violation or parking tickets.

It's simply a reminder, Beaudet said, much like those they have ignored in the past -- possibly for years. "There's nothing threatening or heavy-handed about them," she said. But they and, if necessary, follow-up notices work, she said.

Last month, \$75,469 was collected from scofflaws who mailed money to the court or paid in person. That made December the most successful month of the program, initiated in 2003.

"I'm surprised people pay attention (to the notices)," court Supervisor Deborah Rebh said. There is nothing special about the notices, she said, and people have been ignoring similar notices (sent by the secretary of state's office) for years.

But pay up they do. One man, for example, paid \$3,200 in for numerous parking tickets ignored over the years, Rebh said.

Beaudet theorized some scofflaws simply forgot, then compounded problems by ignoring any subsequent notices. "Or maybe their circumstances have changed," she said. "Maybe they got a new job, or were at a new juncture in their lives."

Whatever the reason, Beaudet and other court officials are pleased -- if surprised.

Collections also mean more money for Michigan coffers, Judge Stephen Cooper noted, which is probably part of the reason state officials have taken note of Southfield's success and are encouraging other courts to follow suit.

By the time Southfield goes after past-due tickets, the initial fine is likely to have almost doubled. A ticket that might have initially cost \$125, Beaudet said, costs \$225 or more, she said, including fees and penalties.

At least half of that would go to the city in which the ticket was issued, she said, with the remainder going to the secretary of state and the state of Michigan.

But the collection program isn't mainly about money, Beaudet insists. "The court's orders should to be enforced," she said, with penalties for noncompliance.

Cashier Judene Bald sees a lot of disgruntled people as she collects delinquent penalties at the counter. "Nobody's happy about having to pay up," she said.

She responds to rudeness, Bald said, with a gentle, but cutting rejoinder. "I gently remind them it would be cheaper had they taken care of the ticket earlier," she said.

Court officials are obviously pleased with the success of the collection program. But Beaudet insists another aspect is equally noteworthy.

"We didn't add any staff," the administrator said. Southfield implemented the program by distributing additional responsibilities to existing staff, she said, with the only additional cost being about \$20,000 for printing and mailing.

Where has that program been all these years?

"We tried other methods of collecting," Beaudet said, including collection agencies and more threatening notices. But they were labor-intensive, she said, "and simply didn't work. We didn't have this technology 15 years ago."

The key, she said, was computer software (subsequently sold to the state) developed by a Kalamazoo-area district court and modified in Southfield. "Kalamazoo also added people for their program," Beaudet said. Southfield has made it work without adding personnel costs.

That computer software enables court workers to call up a particular case when somebody calls in to inquire or complain about the late notice, said Renee Sesi, an administrative assistant who oversees technology.

Computers enable court personnel to call up a particular case and be specific about the date and location of the ticket, Sesi said, as well as penalties and late fees.

The computers also have a direct link to the secretary of state's office. "So when somebody pays us," Rebh said, "we can (usually) take care of license suspensions."
